

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Distributed Readiness Citizenship: A Realistic, Normative Concept for Citizens' Public Connection

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*This article argues that our view of citizens as miserably failing to maintain their role in democracy is problematic, and that the problems stem from the “informed citizen” ideal: it is too demanding, but also misses the target. The article proposes an alternative normative concept for citizens’ public connection: distributed readiness citizenship. The concept highlights how the state of being prepared to act is more important than levels of measurable political knowledge. Readiness is crucial to finding enough information and relevant cues, and it cannot be assessed based on individual citizens in isolation, but should be considered as distributed, and embodied in citizens’ social networks, with a division of labor. With such a conceptualization, we are better equipped to evaluate existing conditions, judge the impact of populism and propaganda, and figure out how to improve the chances for those less well-off to participate in democracy.*

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Political populism is on the rise, and state-funded propaganda is finding new ways to clutter the public sphere, mixing with highly personalized and commercialized content in the digital media landscape. As a response, books have emerged that advocate radical measures, such as withdrawing voting as a universal democratic right (Brennan, 2016), or offer outright warnings of the death of democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). At the center of the debate stands the citizen, seemingly outrageously ignorant of current affairs, incapable of forming opinions on political issues, and unwilling to act beyond immediate private concerns.

This article argues that such an assumption or view of the citizen is flawed. To understand how current societal developments impact on democracy, and to start systematically answering the question regarding what hinders those less well-off from

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participating more fully in democracy, we need to unpack the ideal upon which we base our assessment: that of the informed citizen. The informed citizen is not a stringent theoretical concept, but an ideal used explicitly and implicitly. It denotes a citizen with time and interest in public life, gathering information on a wide range of relevant policy issues in society. Leaving aside the unfeasibility of keeping abreast of political problems across all domains, informed citizenship is not necessarily enough to be capable of participating in democracy, and being informed is not necessarily always required to participate.

Citizens' dual role in democracy is to indicate which aims society should pursue, and then to make sure the political system does its best in fulfilling those aims (Christiano, 2015). Our task as communication scholars is to systematically get at the structural features of a society that provides breeding grounds for populism and effective propaganda, and lead some groups of people to struggle with fulfilling this role. To embark on that task, we need an understanding of citizens' relations to the public realm that (a) identifies the crucial components that citizens need for their dual role in democracy; (b) balances a critical approach with feasibility and attention to context; and (c) understands citizens' media use as one of several ways to connect to the public.

Inspired by the "realist turn" in political theory and discussions of normative requirements, I will identify two problems with holding and potentially acting out of the ideal of the informed citizen. As pointed out by political communication scholars such as John Zaller (2003) and Doris Graber (2003), it is too demanding. But I will argue that, in addition, the informed ideal also misses its target. It is not just unfeasible, it is also undesirable. Information is important, but not the determining factor that we should highlight in a normative ideal. On this basis, I suggest we should let a different norm guide our assessments of citizens' relations to the public realm, and to that end, I introduce the concept of distributed readiness citizenship. Distributed readiness citizenship is not a general theory of citizenship, but a concept referring to citizens' orientations to a sphere of politics in the wide sense: their public connection (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007). Distributed readiness citizenship describes the capabilities citizens need in order to partake in society. These capabilities are hard to strive for, yet obtainable, and they redirect our attention to pertinent problems with actual, existing democracies. I build on economics and studies of voter behavior (Downs, 1957), as well as political history and journalism research that trades "informed" for "monitorial" (Schudson, 1998), but I develop a normative position that contributes an understanding of how social relations matter in media-saturated everyday life. I highlight this point through the insistence on distribution.

In what follows, I first describe the status of the informed citizen ideal in democratic theory and in the field of communication studies. I then present the first problem—being too demanding—through a discussion of realism in normative theory. I argue that a certain level of "thickness" through context awareness and attention to historical facts is important when developing a normative concept to

guide our study of where citizens fail to maintain their role in democracy. Having established a fruitful normative level, I turn to discuss the second problem with the informed citizen ideal, which is that it fails to describe a crucial component of citizens' public connection. I then identify more relevant components of the kind of practice that would serve the citizens. On this basis, I suggest distributed readiness citizenship as a concept that captures the normative expectations we should direct at citizens. Distributed readiness citizenship highlights how, although information is needed, the state of being prepared to act is more important to consider when assessing citizens' relations to the public than levels of "informedness." Readiness refers to the crucial state of being able and willing to find enough relevant information and use cues to inform behavior; it cannot be judged based on individual citizens in isolation, but as embodied in citizens' social networks. In closing, I point to implications and address a potential pitfall: tasks can be distributed, but the rights to information, free speech, or voting cannot. Distributed readiness citizenship is not an excuse for accepting inequality and asymmetric power relations among the public. Rather, it calls for attention to those with weak public connections.

### The informed citizenship ideal and its two problems

When communication scholars engage with conceptualizations of the citizen's public connection or the way one orients oneself to a public sphere, we tend to focus on differences between models. The basic division—invoked, for example, by Habermas in his work from the 1990s—is between the republican and the liberal models (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Habermas, 1996). The former aims for maximum participation. Citizens should partake actively in the running of society through acquiring knowledge, expressing views, listening to others, entering discussions, and helping to find and implement solutions. The latter, liberal model requires a bare minimum of the citizen: in some versions it is enough to privately show a preference in the booth each time an election is called. Deliberative democracy is routinely portrayed as an amalgam of these two, insofar as it affords maximum public participation but introduces procedures to secure an output that can lead to better governance within formal institutions.

Despite holding diverging understandings of democracy, proponents of the liberal, republican, and deliberative models agree on one thing: citizens should be informed. To consider candidates for election based on their individual merits, citizens have to be informed about the candidates' positions and opinions (for a detailed discussion, see Strömbäck, 2005). And, for republicans and proponents of deliberative democracy, being part of an ongoing public discourse among citizens aiming to decide the direction of society likewise requires being informed. Deliberative systems theory, which has formed a focal point for the most recent debates on deliberation and democracy, shows great concern for citizens' participation, but even here, the foundation—even for the least demanding versions—is also an informed citizenry (for a review, see Owen & Smith, 2015). Fresh, complex theoretical constructs

from the field of communication studies, which build nuanced models for citizen-public relations, operate under the same basic assumption. A case in point is Peter Dahlgren's (2015) version of "civic culture" as an "integrated circuit of six dimensions of mutual reciprocity," in which knowledge is the first dimension, with the media playing "a key role." As Scott Althaus (2006) convincingly argued, while you will not find a naive idea of all citizens as fully informed in any democratic theory, the focus on information and the norm of "the more informed, the better" remain widespread.

This idea that being informed is a crucial aspect of being a citizen, and that the media play a crucial role in this, is also deeply ingrained in policy, as well as in journalism's self-understanding. A recent report on media pluralism in 30 European countries, for instance, stated that:

Free media and the plurality of voices constitute the foundations of any healthy democratic society: they are indispensable conditions with which to guarantee that individuals have access to a variety of information and may form their opinions by taking into account different perspectives and views. (Brogi, Bania, Nenadic, Ostling, & Parcu, 2017, p. 2)

To the extent that policy documents provide the rationale for free speech and media regulations, similar formulations abound. Commentators in the press also regularly refer to the ideal of the informed citizen (e.g., see Lupia, 2016). In one sense, this is uncontroversial: independent journalism and media pluralism are resources for a well-functioning democracy. Yet, such formulations also build on a rather simplistic idea that access to a plurality of voices and content in the media leads to individually informed citizens.

A related belief can be found in communication research. Journalism studies regularly assume that journalists are important in serving people when they act as citizens (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, for an overview of positions). And as Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin (2018, p. 2) argued, "almost all theoretical perspectives on political communication rest on an ideal of the behaviors and contextual conditions that shape good citizenship," which includes that citizens should "learn about the social and political world," for which news is a "key circulatory raw material."

The informed ideal is explicit in much empirical political communication research through the use of political knowledge questions in surveys. The basic assumption is that political knowledge—"the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory" (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 10)—is key to people as citizens, and is possible to measure. Communication scholars use that approach to estimate degrees of being informed, arguing that it matters for political engagement, and that the success or failure of journalism can be assessed through correlations between media use and the recall of certain facts about political issues. To measure differences among citizens, the impact of journalism, and people's political engagement, scholars typically quiz informants about recent events, or check their understanding of the political system (for a sound recent example, see Gil

de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Twenty years ago, Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins (1998, p. 3) summed up studies of voter behavior by quoting Cicero: “in the common people there is no wisdom, no penetration, no power of judgement.” The two decades that have passed have brought more of the same: increasingly sophisticated discussions on how to best measure political knowledge (Barabas, Jeri, Pollock & Rainey, 2014), and studies that show big discrepancies between the normative expectations of informed citizens and their practices (Lupia, 2016; Rapeli, 2014).

While some (Brennan, 2016; Luskin, 2002) have used such findings to scorn citizens, others have used them to offer more nuanced discussions. A recent comprehensive review by Van Aelst et al. (2017) is a case in point. They hold that changing “political information environments” have consequences for “the extent to which they aid people in becoming informed citizens” (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 3). Though the authors were careful to underline the fact that political information environments include different sources and actors, they focused on political news, and the research they reviewed that looked at the demand side of this equation measured levels of political knowledge. Van Aelst et al. (2017, p. 5) referred to work that supports the claim that “well-informed citizens are better able to link their interest with their attitudes, choose political representatives who are consistent with their own attitudes, and participate in politics.” Based on their extensive review, they concluded that “there are strong reasons to be concerned about increasing inequalities in media use and knowledge about politics and public affairs” (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 18). These are important findings. Citizens need information to maintain their role in democracy, and research that maps and explains the disparities in the distribution of such information is clearly valuable. Yet, building on earlier contributions that have questioned the usefulness of the informed ideal (e.g. Althaus, 2006; Druckman, 2014), I suggest a different approach. I will leave aside the methodological problems with measuring political knowledge (e.g., see Graber, 2004; Page & Shapiro, 1992), and argue that the very idea of using political knowledge as an indicator of citizens’ public connection is undesirable.

Political information and news are important, but not primarily because they render citizens generally informed. Rather than keep on blaming democracy’s problems on citizens’ failure to live up to the ideal, or strive to adjust political information environments to improve more people’s chances to get closer to the informed ideal, I want to suggest that we should reconsider the norm. There are, I will argue, two problems with the informed citizen as an ideal. It is too demanding, and also misses the target. The first problem is the obvious one: no citizen can be expected to be informed on all the issues on the political agenda in any modern society. This is not to dismiss the use of normative concepts for empirical studies, but to argue that the ideal of the informed citizen is too far removed from the experiences of most people, and biased to a certain form of orientation (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018). The second problem with the ideal is not the perceived distance from experienced reality, but the fact that it misses the target: being informed is not essential for citizens’ role in

democracy, but also not necessarily enough. I will argue that being informed, then, is not the crucial component of a normative citizenship concept. The next two sections will delve into these two problems.

### **Too demanding: How to develop a realistic normative ideal**

The problem with the informed citizen ideal being too far removed from empirical reality and too demanding for the citizen points to a basic question in normative theory: how do we develop a useful normative concept? Before we can carve out a feasible norm for citizens to strive for when partaking in democracy, we need to discuss how such a norm should be built.

John Rawls' (2001) influential theory of justice, which he developed over several decades, resulted in a great deal of productive friction in political theory. For Rawls, an ideal theory—where one assumes full cooperation from all actors and favorable social conditions—is required as a tool to “yield a systematic understanding of how to reform our non-ideal world” (Wenar, 2017, para. 2.3). The informed citizen could make sense as a concept of ideal theory. In a hypothetical situation where everyone complies with the chosen laws and principles, and where social conditions facilitate people to live up to those principles, being informed could perhaps seem like an achievable task. The critique levelled at ideal theory, though, argues that the approach is not that fruitful.

Such critiques are sometimes lumped together under the rubric of “non-ideal theory,” which starts from a representation of a phenomenon's essential nature and basic dynamics. From such a position, one would argue that in cases where most instances of the phenomenon are quite different from an idealized ideal, it is easier to “identify and understand the peculiar features that explain [the phenomenon's] dynamic and prevent it from attaining ideality” (Mills, 2005, p. 167) if we work from the non-ideal abstraction of actually existing instances. Non-ideal theory is about the gaps “between what we ought to aim for and what we can do” (Frazer, 2010, p. 498). In communication studies, Amartya Sen's capabilities approach is one example of how the cues from non-ideal theory have been mobilized (e.g. Coleman & Moss, 2015).

Portrayed as a countermovement to the “reign” of high liberalism (Galston, 2010, p. 385), with Bernard Williams (2005) and Raymond Geuss (2008) as much-quoted thinkers, democratic realism is a label used on a different critique of ideal theory. While some non-ideal theory proponents argue for lowering the bar of what we can expect to make the norms more useful as regulatory devices, realists offer a more substantial critique (Hall, 2017; Sleat, 2016). With a lineage from Hobbes, democratic realism is explicitly anti-utopian. The first virtue of politics is not justice, but order, and “preventing the worst is the first duty of political leaders” (Galston, 2010, p. 394). This does not imply a knee-jerk defense of the status quo in politics. Rather, realists claim an interest in an “empirically informed critique of social and political phenomena” (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 348), and have explicit normative ambitions. A basic difference between realism and ideal theory is the insistence on

starting from historically and politically sensitive judgments when building normative concepts (Hall, 2017). For instance, if we want to understand privacy issues in the data age, we should not merely check social media user practices against a static concept of privacy, but recognize how new technologies, social media use, and surveillance experiences change our understanding of privacy itself, and then look at the political consequences (Hall, 2017). Williams (2005, p. 49) invited us to explore the balance between “thin” concepts, which offer abstract and procedural considerations removed from people’s everyday lives, and “thick” concepts, which are substantive and more easily related to a specific “ethical constituency.” The aim should be to balance a critical stance with “realizability” and the engagement with empirical research (Nielsen, 2017), and thus retain a normative potential.

Democratic realism claims a fundamentally different approach to understanding politics and democracy, compared to the Rawlsian high liberalism. This claim is disputed (Maynard & Worsnip, 2018). Yet, on the issue of normativity, democratic realism resonates with other, seemingly incompatible traditions in political theory. Michael Walzer (1993), for instance, developed a kind of communitarian immanent critique as a form of social activity performed from within, based on standards shared in the community. Grounding theory in the empirical has also been important to scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, albeit on a macro level. For Honneth, who built his approach on Habermas’ normative reconstruction is “a procedure that aims to develop normative theory by identifying and reworking the norms and ideals already inherent in modern institutions, and then evaluating them through normative comparison” (Karppinen, 2018, p. 75). A genealogical method is needed to make sure that the normative potential found in social, economic, and political practices and institutions has not changed, argued Honneth (Pedersen, 2012; Pedersen also examines differences between Habermas and Honneth on this issue).

Such an insistence on the empirical—grounding a normative concept in an analysis of actual practices—can also be found elsewhere in political theory. In a recent contribution to deliberative democratic systems theory, David Owen and Graham Smith (2015, p. 232) proposed a systemic formulation which “directs us to the comparative project of working through the roles and sites of democratic deliberation in different democratic systems, that is, to building normative democratic theory in close relation to comparative analysis of democratic practice.” The call for context-aware developments of normative concepts, then, is not unique for democratic realism. These examples illustrate how “political theories can be seen as more or less realistic along a continuum” and that “whether a normative political theory is sufficiently ‘fact-sensitive/realistic’ or not depends on its intended aim and question” (Valentini, 2012, p. 660).

While it might not always be stringently formulated based on ideal theory, the informed citizen model is less useful if we want to understand the conditions a citizenry lives under, and then improve their possibilities to undertake the important work needed for democracy to function. Following Laura Valentini (2012, p. 660), if “we wish to design prescriptions that are likely to be effective, given some common

flaws in human behaviour, then we better factor in more real-world constraints.” This explains why being informed is a less useful norm to operate under when the goal is to find the obstacles that prevent those less well-off from participating in society. As a normative ideal, the informed citizen is too ignorant of historical context and actual existing conditions and, therefore, too demanding. By considering real-world constrictions, we prescribe a procedure for rethinking the crucial component of citizens’ relations to the public.

### **Missing the target: Identifying the crucial component of citizens’ public connection**

The procedure towards a realistic, normative concept of citizens’ relations to the public realm, then, should pay due attention to facts, and to social realities. If we do that, it also becomes clear how the informed ideal misses its target. Two quite different disciplines can shed light on why this is so.

A first inroad to the reason why the informed ideal fails in describing a crucial component for citizens can be found in the discipline of political history: specifically, in the work of Michael Schudson (1998, 2000). Based on the US case, his research convincingly showed how, historically, different versions of democracy have come with different concepts of what a citizen is. Accordingly, the reform movement in the late-19th century United States brought a shift from a trust-based citizen concept to the informed citizen concept, requiring a citizen to become capable of assessing candidates for election based on their individual qualities. For Schudson (2000, p. 16), the 1900s brought forth the monitorial citizen: a citizen “informed enough and alert enough.” While the informed citizen gathers information, the monitorial citizen supervises, and can multitask while being watchful (Schudson, 1998). As a consequence, the public connection is maintained while attending to other tasks.

The monitorial concept has been used by a range of scholars: for example, to develop a new “burglar alarm” standard for journalism (Zaller, 2003); to survey citizens’ political interest, efficacy, action, and channels for participation (Hooghe & Dejaeghere, 2007); to analyze young people’s modes of political engagement (Hustinx, Meijs, Handy, & Cnaan, 2012); to study different uses of news in a digital media landscape (Meijer & Kormelink, 2015; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018); and to describe an altogether new phase of democracy (Keane, 2009). While such contributions vary in their specific use of the term “monitorial,” a common denominator is the exploration of citizens’ relations to the public in today’s Western societies. The crucial component this body of work points to is, as opposed to being generally informed, a form of surveillance, of standing by, with the ability to act when needed.

Schudson (2000) neither thought of the monitorial citizen as a substitute for previous citizen concepts, nor as a “laid back” model with no normative potential (for a criticism, see Bennett, 2003). On the contrary, he argued that it was, in some ways, more demanding, given that “one’s peripheral vision should always have a political or civic dimension” (Schudson, 2000, p. 16). In sum, along with diverse empirical

studies, including of news consumption, the argument, based on the historical analysis of political communication and political life, proposes that in our societies, being monitorial could be a more apt norm for citizens when performing their role in democracy.

The second perspective that is helpful in explaining the problem with the informed ideal missing its target comes from economics, particularly Anthony Downs' (1957) theory of democracy (cf. Zaller, 2003). Like scholars such as Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954), Downs was interested in how people could make choices with limited information. He explained how we rely on cues or information shortcuts in all domains, including the political. In the language of rational choice, a person is inclined to transfer the cost of gathering, selecting, transmitting, analyzing, and evaluating data for political information to others, be they news media, political parties, interest groups, experts, or other citizens (Downs, 1957). For Downs, this is not merely an observable fact of life, but a necessity in complex societies. Without such an extensive use of shortcuts, democracy would fail in an instant.

Political scientists and economists build on such ideas when they study rational ignorance. Some studies tend to be critical of citizens' lack of abilities to form opinions and act responsibly (e.g. Caplan, 2007), or show how many citizens today base their decisions on social loyalties (Achen & Bartels, 2016). These discussions are founded on a more or less explicit normative ideal with clear connections to the informed citizen. Others have argued that we should judge the public's rationality as a collective (Page & Shapiro, 1992). Political psychology has shown how political judgments can be made based on already "stored" evaluations, freeing citizens from getting specific, new information: a distinction between so-called "on-line" and "memory-based" political information processing (Sullivan, Rahn & Rudolph, 2002, p. 38). Such studies have led some to argue that "information holding is but one standard of good citizenship and not necessarily an appropriate or important one" (Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995, p. 322). Yet others have tried to study when and how people make use of cues or information shortcuts, and when such shortcuts are useful substitutes for information (Graber, 2004). There are problems with such heuristics: for example, they seem to work better for certain groups of the population, and are prone to manipulation (for recent overviews, see Lupia, 2016; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Though there is disagreement on the value of information shortcuts, they are a fact of human life, and central for people's orientation towards the public realm. Rather than condemning the use of cues, we should think about how to build a normative ideal on that basis.

Political philosophers, such as Thomas Christiano (1996, 2015), offer such a contribution. For Christiano (2015, p. 258), "the expectation that every citizen should be informed in a way that is independent of how others are informed" is an ideal "spectacularly irrelevant for all societies that have moved beyond the hunter-gatherer stage." In fact, "most of us are downright stupid when it comes to most of the conditions on which our lives depend" (Christiano, 2015, p. 257). Whether it is the choice of toothpaste, the effects of medical treatments, or the structure

of banks' personal saving products, we know little to nothing. People can have an informed opinion without being able to justify their beliefs, he argues, since they depend on others' judgments. [Christiano \(2015\)](#) calls this an external standard of well-groundedness.

In political science literature, such a division of labor is sometimes conceived as separations into issue publics (e.g. [Berelson et al., 1954](#)), with critical discussions about the problems they entail, especially if the division goes too far and results in solid, rather than porous, borders between such publics (a concern also found, for example, in normative deliberative democratic theory). The role of experts, as another aspect of an intellectual division of labor, faces similar criticism. There is, however, a tendency that such criticism, after rightfully establishing that neither information shortcuts nor issue publics and the use of experts provides an easy fix, dismisses these mechanisms altogether (for a case in point, see [Somin, 2016](#)). This is unproductive.

Experts, for instance, can be seen not just as a threat to democracy, but as key actors in a political process led by reason. Acknowledging that people rely on others' expertise on a given topic leads to discussions of how to best facilitate a division of labor, to set up an "epistocracy by democratic delegation" ([Holst & Molander, 2019](#), p. 7). The crucial aspect, then, is the resources a citizen has at her disposal for the external grounding of beliefs: the information environment, which consists of a range of media and providers, but also the social network she can mobilize, which could include civil society or interest groups, political organizations, family, friends, colleagues, and experts of different kinds. From this perspective, the individual's own levels of accumulated information that can be recalled on a given topic is not the determining factor. What the normative discussion, based on economists' studies of voter behavior offers, then, is a shift of focus from each citizen's isolated, extensive information gathering to uses of information shortcuts in a social network. As a result, being an informed citizen seems less important as an ideal.

Both of the two paths discussed here lead to a realization that being informed is an unlikely candidate for a crucial component of citizenship. [Schudson's \(1998\)](#) political history stresses a form of monitoring, requiring from individuals a low-level, but always-on, attention towards the public realm. The perspective offered by [Christiano \(2015\)](#) adds an insistence on the division of labor, steering us clear of atomic thinking by underlining the social aspect of citizenship. Taken together, we see the following elements emerging as more important for the citizens' public connection: a person's alertness, being ready to act with a basis in a previously developed platform, with a social network that makes up the nodes and links needed to execute the action when required. If this is to serve as a basis for a normative concept, the question is, what place there is for mediated communication?

### **The role of mediated communication**

It should come as no surprise to communication scholars that the contributions mobilized in this discussion so far had little to say about the media. [Downs \(1957\)](#) did

count journalistic media as a relevant actor for peoples' information gathering, but he arguably paid more attention to political parties, lobbyists, and fellow citizens. The research on voter behavior in political science followed suit, typically noting the press as a factor, but without digging into specifics (e.g., Lupia, 2016; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Political philosophers also have less to say about the workings of the media sector, and the role of mediated communication more broadly, than about in-person deliberations or mechanisms to push concerns from citizens toward the centers of power in a society. Deliberative system theorists refer to this mechanism as "transmission" (e.g., Boswell, Hendriks, & Ercan, 2016): a term which, at best, connotes a simplistic idea of how communication works in real social settings. And in recent discussions of how to balance the democratic aim of equal participation with the epistemic quality of discussions and decisions, the role of mediated communication has either been limited to the journalistic press, with attention given to journalist-source relations (e.g., Chambers, 2017), or abstracted away in an exchange of general discussions of public space (Erman, 2016).

The problem here is not so much a lack of acknowledgment of the importance of the media in and for democracies, but the lack of nuanced understandings of what "the media" means for citizens today. This is also a challenge for Schudson's (1998) work on monitorial citizenship, by now two decades old. For people in the affluent parts of the world, the media encompasses not only the institutions of the mass media, but also new and less institutionalized actors, ranging from YouTube, blogs, and so-called alternative media to peers and random individuals. The divisions between different distribution technologies make less and less sense as Internet protocols become the favored mode for sending information, and this entanglement persists as the small computers we still call phones facilitate cross-media use everywhere and anytime. As audience researchers have argued, media has become "increasingly ubiquitous, intrusive and hyper-connected" (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2018, p. 547). There is a need to disentangle.

In terms of news use, research has shown how social media can help expose people to news, and how those who are incidentally exposed to news in social media seem to rely on more sources than average (for a comparison of Italy, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, see Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), but has also shown that such news reading is more fragmented and spread out through the day (on Argentina, see Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). The mobile phone is central here, as a form of meta-medium used to micro-organize everyday lives (on Denmark, see Thorhaug, 2016), sometimes disrupting the flow of other tasks (Ytre-Arne, Karlsen, Moe, & Syvertsen, 2018), but also being used for news: for some as an addition to traditional providers and for others as a new entry point to information about society (e.g., on Flanders, see Van Damme, Courtois, & Verbrugge, 2015). A further contribution to the disentangling can be found in studies of how fictional media content may, depending on advantageous combinations of media repertoires and socio-economic background resources, provide audiences with a connection to the sphere of politics (on Norway, see Nærland, 2018). Researchers

with an interest in social class have also shown how news consumption differs depending on such background variables (on Sweden, see [Lindell, 2018](#)). Moreover, practices sometimes discussed under the heading of “media literacy,” such as Internet search practices (on the United Kingdom, see [Davies, 2017](#)) or Internet skills more generally (on older US adults, see [Hargittai, Piper, & Morris, 2018](#)), show robust inequalities along the same kind of variables.

The point here is not to offer a comprehensive review of what we know about media use as concerning public connection, but to underline the importance of doing specific, empirical work to figure out how different forms of mediated communication matter for citizens in different settings. Equally important, however, is to maintain a certain sobriety regarding the centrality of the media for citizens’ public connections ([Livingstone, 2018](#)).

Mediated communication—for example, through social networking sites—does permeate civil society, workplaces, and peoples’ engagement with each other in private settings. At the same time, the family dinner, the lunch break at work, the local sports team, and the community initiative still represent arenas for citizens to connect with the public (e.g., on civil society groups, see [Eimhjellen, 2014](#); on infrequent users of conventional news, see [Toff & Nielsen, 2018](#)). [Schudson \(2000, p. 17\)](#) saw the press as a tool, not as the “the focal point,” of civic life. That still holds today for the media more broadly. Scrutiny of the media is important if we want to grasp the structural challenges for citizens’ democratic participation, but we cannot limit our analysis to practices where media appears central. A normative concept of citizens’ relations to the public realm, then, needs to acknowledge how journalistic media constitutes but one aspect of the ubiquity of mediated communication, and that mobile and social media potentially extend existing nodes and create new nodes in peoples’ social networks, which are important for their public connection.

### **Distributed readiness citizenship**

The insights from the clarification of the two problems with the informed citizen ideal, and the discussion of the role of mediated communication, can now be brought together in a formulation of a realistic, normative concept.

The crucial component of citizens’ public connection is neither being informed, nor monitoring. What we need is a term that is less, but simultaneously more, demanding. It can be less demanding concerning the general level of individual attention needed to maintain an overview of multiple domains. The term also has to shift our focus from the very act of monitoring, towards the more substantial qualities and capabilities needed, and in that way should end up being more demanding. The German term *Bereitschaft* covers these objectives. In English, *Bereitschaft* is translated as preparedness or readiness: the condition of being ready; the state of being prepared. You reach readiness through planning, training, outfitting, and experience. Readiness needs to be maintained, but once it reaches a certain level, one can be called upon to respond effectively to the condition in question. In daily use, such terms are

linked to governmental organizations and to sudden events. *Bereitschaftspolizei* is the German riot police, and *Ready*, the US public service campaign that promotes, among other initiatives, “National Preparedness Month,” aims to “educate and empower the American people to prepare for, respond to and mitigate emergencies” (Ready, 2018). In the United States, “preppers” is used as derogatory slang to describe survivalists, who form a loosely organized movement actively planning for emergencies, typically involving a disruption in the social and political order. Globally, war, terrorist threats, and extreme weather conditions strengthen the attention given to such initiatives and movements.

It is not the intention to align citizens’ everyday role in the running of democracies with that of planning for a catastrophe. By evoking readiness to describe the crucial competence a citizen needs to partake in the rule of democratic society, I emphasize a use of the term that highlights a set of abilities and resources required for the task ahead, whether or not that task is connected to an abrupt external event or a slowly progressing shift in conditions. Readiness is needed in all sorts of everyday encounters and actions. This understanding is akin to the use of readiness in psychology to describe or measure the condition of being able to learn: for example, the readiness in the stage of a child’s maturity to learn something new. Readiness citizenship relieves the citizen of a requirement to be informed of all relevant current issues, but it also mitigates the individual’s responsibility to monitor. Readiness includes an alertness directed to the public, but encompasses more: being ready means having access to certain resources; having practiced, been close to the action, or previously participated under similar conditions; and having acquired knowledge or experience. Readiness is characterized by flexibility; it means being equipped to act when needed: to organize and to adapt.

In this understanding, readiness has some tangential points with other concepts. It covers some of the requirements identified in interpretations of Schudson’s monitorial concept (e.g. Hooghe & Dejaeghere, 2007): it requires a basic interest in politics and efficacy, while highlighting the importance of these aspects beyond—or prior to—the information gathering and the monitoring. Further, there is a similarity to what is sometimes referred to as “political literacy,” though that term is linked to US educational policy discussions (e.g. Cassel & Lo, 1997). Other neighboring terms, such as “political awareness” (Zaller, 1992), still maintain a focus on the degree of attention, similar to the idea of the monitorial citizen. As for the scholars who explicitly lower the bar and argue that the “fully informed voter” is harmful, such as Lupia (2016, p. 256), there is still a focus on the information that builds knowledge, which can be mobilized as a competence for the citizen. That leads, for instance, to a discussion of how to adjust surveys to better measure respondents’ political knowledge (Lupia, 2016). My argument is more radical, in the sense that it suggests we should shift attention from informational levels to readiness in a broader sense, not because information is not an important prerequisite, but because taking the informed citizen ideal for granted hinders us from seeing other, crucial components of citizens’ relations to the public.

In addition to evoking readiness to grasp the characteristics of desirable citizen behavior, my proposition also differs in highlighting our social networks. Readiness must be distributed, which will help dispel any potential visions of a lone hoarder of canned food in a shelter in the woods. Not everyone needs to be individually ready for each hypothetical political development, shift in policies, or political scandal. The responsibility has to be distributed across the network, following the logic of division of labor between people with more or less expertise in different topics and varying degrees of interest in certain issues and developments. As argued by [Christiano \(2015, p. 260\)](#):

As long as there are enough people monitoring the situation who can sound the alarm if there is a problem, and as long as there are enough people who can hear the alarm, most people will benefit from using the shortcut of assuming that if there is no audible alarm, there is no problem.

There are clear echoes of [Schudson's \(1998\)](#) "monitorial citizen" here, as well as of [Zaller's \(2003\)](#) "burglar alarm standard for news," but emphasizing the social aspect of everyday life adds feasibility and specifies how an alarm system might function in a complex democracy. Every citizen does not have to listen actively for every possible alarm to go off, as long as someone does, and reports it. In essence, this entails a distribution of the burden of citizenship. The task of staying "informed enough," or the preparedness needed to enable springing into action when that is called for, is delegated among the nodes in a citizen's social network. It would be wrong to call this a lowering of expectations, though, since the task of being ready and the distribution of alertness require each citizen to develop competences and, more or less, take their turn in the monitoring of specific issues.

Mediated communication has to be an integrated tool for distributed readiness citizenship. A citizen's network will clearly profit from stable, independent, quality news provision, as well as access to social networking sites and online resources for information. Exactly to what extent different groups of citizens use such different tools, and which specific kind of news provision reaches who, is an empirical question. The notion of distributed readiness citizenship can guide our analysis of mediated communication when we strive to figure out exactly how the readiness is distributed.

## Implications and conclusion

Focusing on citizens' relations to the sphere of politics—their public connection—this article has discussed how the norm we rely on, implicitly and explicitly, fails in various ways to serve its purpose. The aim has been to raise awareness of how the scope and limits of theoretical concepts have consequences for our assessments. I identified two problems with using the informed citizen as a guide for empirical studies, and for evaluations of existing conditions: it demands too much, and it does not describe a crucial practice for citizens. Based on contributions from political theory and pursuing a more realist approach but retaining a normative potential,

I have argued that a historical analysis, awareness of specific cultural and social settings, and fact sensitivity are required. The aim is a “thicker” concept, trading some universalism for feasibility.

I have argued that “readiness” is a better candidate than “informed” as the key phrase, but that the citizen’s task needs to be understood in accordance with an intellectual division of labor, steering clear of atomistic thinking, and acknowledging the social reality of everyday life. The argument is not that information is unimportant, but that the often implicit ideal of the informed citizen makes us ignore other, central competences for citizenship. Critiquing a lack of nuanced attention to the role of mediated communication in previous theorizations, I have underlined how journalistic media is an important part of people’s public connections, but still just one part. On this basis, I have proposed distributed readiness citizenship as a concept that can guide our analysis: realistic and normative, situating citizens in their social world, and grasping the pervasive media environments of today’s societies.

Introducing the distribution of tasks might lead some to also consider the distribution of rights. This would be in direct opposition to fundamental democratic ideas. While the expectations regarding people’s orientation towards politics should be changed, and while we need to acknowledge a division of labor that builds their public connection, all citizens should have equal democratic rights. Rather than paving the way for elites to manipulate the general public, distributed readiness citizenship invites us to realistically engage with the actually existing mechanisms citizens use—informational shortcuts, divisions into issue publics—to figure out how such mechanisms can work better for more members of the public. Moreover, the concept is not meant as a freestanding category of citizens. I am not claiming that all citizens should or do adhere to the practices of distributed readiness. Even some well-informed citizens today base their decisions on social loyalties (Achen & Bartels, 2016). What I am suggesting is that distributed readiness citizenship is a notion that can work normatively to guide our descriptive and evaluative work.

This proposal has at least two implications for empirical analysis: one for how we design studies of public connection and one for on whom and upon what we decide to focus. First, attention to the public as a collective does not mean we should make do with time-series survey data of public opinions (Page & Shapiro, 1992). If we have distributed readiness citizenship in mind when we approach the question of how people in different settings connect with a public, then we should ask different questions: we should aim to study uses across different media, or media repertoires (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012), but we should also integrate analyses of peoples’ practices and routines in everyday life in general, at home with family, at work, at the mall, or on the golf course. It appears less relevant to quiz respondents about political facts, and more relevant to figure out how certain journalistic media, used on different platforms, mix with online social networking, and with voluntary work, access to information and discussion in the workplace, and feelings of efficacy towards issues of concern in the local community. Such an endeavor requires a combination of methods, but more importantly, it entails new answers as we pose different

questions, since we are not basing our analysis on checking how well respondents can recall facts, but mapping their experience and their abilities to mobilize a network when faced with the need to get involved in politics. In that endeavor, we can try to study how people evaluate new issues based on their existing beliefs and prior judgments (e.g. Lodge et al., 1995). If knowledge is to be tested at all, perhaps instead of probing respondents like students at an exam, we could have informants tell us what they know through interviews, as suggested by Rapeli (2014). A two-step methodological design can also be valuable, where qualitative interviews identify issues—as well as important mechanisms and channels for informants' public connections—which, in the next step, are applied in a survey to test generalizability (Hovden & Moe, 2017).

The second implication of turning towards a notion of distributed readiness citizenship has to do with where we direct our attention. The concept is intended to get us closer to actually existing practices, in order to understand why they fall short. Shifting the focus when considering normative expectations does not mean anything goes; the concept should be suitable for identifying obstacles faced by those less well-off when they try to maintain their roles in democratic governance. For research, this steers our attention away from early adopters and those with high interest in news. Previous discussions of monitorial citizens and new news standards have tended to concern the quality of news (Bennett, 2003; Zaller, 2003) or how the media can serve those with clear political interests (Graber, 2003).

I suggest we look elsewhere. The news junkies and the politically engaged are doing fine. We should be interested in the rest, including the majority that have little time to spare for acquiring political knowledge, and those groups who, for different reasons, appear at the periphery of society. What kind of resources do they need to strengthen their public connection? Information shortcuts are necessary, so how can we make them work better for those with sparse connections, and how can we make a structure that minimizes the manipulation of those well-informed and those in power? How do social networks and institutions, such as civil society groups or unions, matter, and are they fulfilling their potential as nodes one can rely upon when the labor is distributed? Building on the two-step research design outlined above to identify and map components of people's public connection, a third step would be to use survey data to find those groups who struggle, and then spend time, perhaps through ethnographic work, to figure out how, in different societies, those groups best can be served in order to allow them to act as citizens. Facing populism, new forms of propaganda, increased datafication, and withering social structures, this is where we should direct our attention when we analyze and evaluate the state of democracies.

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